John Bull's Embassy as English as London

By AARON HARDY ULM

THE few hundred square feet of space between Connecticut avenue and Nineteenth street, Washington, occupied by the representatives of King George, is as English as No. 10 Downing street, London, where the government of the great empire centers.

The run of embassies and legations at the national capital reflects no great amount of the atmosphere of the countries represented. Many of them are superlatively modern in the strict American sense. Some do business in office buildings, others operate in the embassy or legation dwellings, which rarely display any external and but little internal contrast with the general life of Washington. The staffs of many are made up in great part of wide-awake Americans hired for the purpose.

Not so with the embassy of the greatest empire on earth. Not only the "looks" but the very smells there are British—even English. The customs of London are as dominant there as on Threadneedle street.

"Pardon me until I finish my tea," said a member of the staff whom the writer called there to see the other day. It happened to be 4 p. m., when the work of the embassy invariably stops for that rite as sacred to the Englishman as the Union Jack itself—afternoon tea.

The staff member referred to has been connected with the Washington embassy for more than thirty years; yet with him as with all others there a cup of tea at 4 p. m. takes precedence of all things else.

At that hour servants go from office to office with simple trays on which are steaming pots and plates of cake or buns and the diplomatic affairs of the great empire mark time while tradition receives its daily tribute.

In keeping with their fidelity to things British, the members of the embassy staff at Washington take a sort of pride in the very ugliness of the embassy buildings; for, after all, it is English ugliness. "Ah! If Sir William Thornton who bought this property and erected the main building hadn't preferred size to latitude, what a fine location we would have!" they exclaim in lamentation over the absence of a garden. That's the only thing, in fact, you miss from the environment of the embassy. It seems that Sir William, who was the ambassador back in the early seventies when the present embassy plant was established, had peculiar ideas concerning the kind of building that should house his country's diplomatic representatives in America. He wanted something that would typify bigness. He could have purchased the entire square selected for the location had he been willing to get along with a smaller structure. The ground then was cheap as compared with present land prices in that vicinity and there was no other building on the block. But Sir William, determined on a structure that would properly reflect the hugeness of the empire, bought only one-half the square. Now the other half of the square is covered with privately owned structures that seem to flout American hustle at staid British conservatism.

So despite the big dwelling that somehow suggests the mid-stern amplitude of John Bull as well as his misproportioned pomposity, the Britishers feel cramped.

"No breathing room, don't you know," they complain.

Even the fair-sized yard that used to lie by the embassy had to be given over to a couple office structures when the Great War increased the work and the force of the establishment.

Prior to the war all the office work—they call it "chancery" work—was carried on inside the building where the ambassador and his family make their home. Now it is done in the new structure, hastily and rather cheaply erected.

Hence if you have any business with the British embassy not of such high importance as to claim the personal attention of the ambassador you go directly to the office building, where simplicity incarnate reigns.

Dignity and class? Yes, they are there but not expressed in such tangible realities as fine furnishings, uniformed attendants or ritualistic formality. In the hallway, you come in contact with a messenger who, when not chasing through the offices, sits in a three-dollar chair beside a five-dollar table, which, with a few other chairs, constitute the furniture of the reception room. On the walls are pictures of the Prince of Wales, Marshal Foch, General Pershing and other notables, all having been ripped from the rotogravure sections of the Sunday papers.

Photos (C) Harris & Ewing

British Embassy in Washington.

Upper—A new photograph of Sir Auckland Geddes, new ambassador from Great Britain to the United States.

Lower—A new photograph of Lady Auckland Geddes, wife of the ambassador from Great Britain to the United States. She was reared on Staten Island where her marriage took place. She has five children.

The offices are almost as simply equipped. If you move around in the chair they give you, a nob or two is liable to rattle to the floor and make you wonder if a catastrophe isn't at hand. But you find on examination that the chairs, after all, are substantial, though their adornment features are sometimes unstable.

The "dignity and class" are in the atmosphere, British charged atmosphere, that would seem albeit to have been transposed from the other side.

Of course all embassies differ, but to the novice the surprising thing about most of them, and especially that of the British, is the absence of unnecessary formality. The act of calling at the British embassy on business, provided you are not a dignitary, is hampered by about the same degree of formality that prevails in the office of a fairly prosperous small city lawyer. It is easier to reach your man there than to be admitted to the august presence of the average sub-executive in many of our government bureaus. A fine sort of restrained, dignified democracy prevails at the British embassy, though it does represent a monarchy. If you happen to go there on business of high importance, you may be taken into the main building, where you will come in contact with that rigid British show of formalism. If you enter through the main doorway, your wits will be frightened out of you by a group of ushers in knee breeches and silk stockings that seem to have stepped out of a Romney or a Reynolds picture.

If their starchy stares don't overwhelm you, a reception hall of majestic proportions, one that would be pretty if any part of a building of such exaggerated design could be pretty, will entrance you. At the head of the grand stairway, there hangs a life-size portrait of Queen Victoria. It was made perhaps in the fifties, for it shows her at her womanly best. From the walls other representatives of British royalty look down upon you. All the rooms that you will see are spacious with tremendously high ceilings, and walls and fittings that typify British stolidity. There's a suspicion that when Sir William Thornton had the building designed, his thought was to make it so massive that, in bulk, it would forever stand at the head of Washington embassies. Now, even the Cuban legation exceeds it in bulk and is many times more beautiful. But the old hulk of a building has figured hugely in the diplomatic life of Washington and in the history of America. It has been occupied by many noted ambassadors—Sir Michael Herbert; Sir Mortimer Durand; Lord Sackville-West, he of the Cleveland letter episode; Sir Julian Pauncefote, who had much to do with preserving peace during the Venezuela embroglio and who helped settle the Behring Sea controversy; Sir Cecil Spring-Rice; Viscount James Bryce; Lord Reading; Earl Grey—"the greatest living Englishman," breathed a member of the embassy staff when he was mentioned—and others. The present occupant, Sir Auckland Geddes, is a newcomer but has made deep impress on Washington and the country since he arrived a short time ago. But he has not lingered much around in Washington so far, being out in the country most of the time on speech-making bent.

"He wants to get acquainted with the country as quickly as he can," said one of his assistants. "That's why he is accepting so many invitations to make speeches."

The ambassador isn't as much of a stranger as the remark would indicate, for he spent several years in Canada as a professor in McGill University at Montreal. And his wife, Lady Geddes, is an American woman, who, before her marriage, was Miss Isabella Ross, of New York City.

The new ambassador and his wife are younger than most of their predecessors. They have five children, the eldest being only twelve years old. None of the children are with them now, but Lady Geddes will return to England for them this summer.

The new ambassador is unique in that he is not by profession a literary man, a diplomatist nor a politician. He is a scientist and was a college professor until the war made him famous as an administrator.

In the early days of the war he served in the army at the front.

The war has made many changes in the British diplomatic service as represented in Washington.

"There isn't a person in executive position at the embassy who did not see service in the army," said an attaché to the writer.

A recent development in international diplomacy that you run into at the British embassy is the tremendous growth in the commercial phases of that art.

Until a few years ago, one rarely thought of commerce in connection with embassies. Now the commercial division of the British embassy is larger than the political. It contains trade experts and learned economists. While they devote themselves to various aspects of trade, they don't yet unbend to the point of having much directly to do with the operating machinery of business. They confine themselves largely to general studies, and to watching the general currents of trade.

"Ours is properly more an economic than a commercial function," said one who is attached to that branch. "The consular service looks after routine commercial matters; we attend to principles. The war demonstrated the high importance of economics, especially as represented by commerce, in modern affairs. The diplomatic machinery of nearly every country is being devoted in great part to economics, aside from politics.

The British embassy is still the most important of Washington diplomatic establishments, as our embassy in London takes the lead in our establishments abroad.

But for some reason the British embassy in this country is not the highest ranking of all British establishments. However, it is tending to become so. Several British writers have gone so far as to say that it should be put on that plane.

"The part of British ambassador at Washington is as important in the interests of the empire as the office of foreign secretary," one of them declared only a few months ago.

Paying the Toll Through Life

AT EAST Haddam across the Connecticut River is a long, wide bridge. On one side of the river is the town; on the other, the railroad station. In the center of the bridge is a tollgate, and people passing from the town to the station, and back again, are required to pay toll. It was agreed at the time the bridge was erected, that as soon as enough money was collected by the payment of tolls to pay for its construction, the roadway would be free.

For many years the people of that vicinity, and others using the bridge, have been paying toll, and are still doing so. The collecting of this toll, year after year, would seem to be a burden. Yet the sooner the cost of the bridge is paid for, the sooner the tollgate will be abolished.

There are many people who along the highway of their lives have erected a tollgate. They have had to pay toll for some act which has all but ruined their career.

It may be that in some moment of temptation, they were led to be dishonest. Perhaps the law has been appeased and they are free to begin a new life. But for years, they must pay the toll for that act. Already the people of that Connecticut village have once passed on the tollgate on the bridge, to another generation, and their sons and daughters have had to contribute to the cost of the bridge, built so long ago. But every year brings the day nearer when the bridge will have been paid for, and the tollgate will be abolished. When that time arrives, the town will hold a celebration such as it has never seen before.

Wise is the man and woman who, in the broad highway of their lives, have placed no tollgate! Happy are they who can travel from the cradle to the grave without paying toll. But there are not many such, and to the millions who for years have been paying toll, and are still paying, let there be a word of encouragement.

If the way seems hard, if you are almost tempted to go back to the old life, and begin to feel that all this toll paying is useless and without end, just remember that some day the bridge will be paid for, and the tollgate will be removed.

Don't be discouraged! Pay the toll at the gate which you yourself have erected, and be patient, until the cost has been paid.